Notes from NACSA authorizer conference   October 20-23, 2014
M&D Wilhelm

Charter School Accountability
Focus on outcomes/ not process
Make sure expectations are consistent
Have multiple measures of performance
Compare school performance to State grading system
Set targets relative to statewide data
Have annual measureable objectives
Look at sub-group growth and proficiency
Compare similar populations
Is education equitable among sub-groups
Targets need to be absolute
Norm referenced growth-compare with average student
Criterion referenced growth – does it reach a certain criteria
What is the relationship of growth to proficiency

Post-Secondary Readiness
How does the following compare to state data?
      SAT performance
      SAT participation
      Graduation rate
      Dual enrollment – High School/College
      Industry certification
      Post Secondary Enrollment
      Remediation rate

Financial Accountability
Poor financial health is the #1 reason charter schools close.
Independent audits are necessary but they don't necessarily uncover vulnerability
Financial targets should be based on non-profit financial best practices
Is there a financial accountability framework in place?
What does contract say about finances?
Is cash flow positive?
Is there evidence of debt delinquency?
Look at ratio of funds to expenses
School should have 60 days cash in hand
Debt to asset ratio goal is 1:1
Enrollment variance is an important window of future finances
How accurately can school project enrollment?
Board financial reports need to be accurate
What is the authorizer allowed to ask an ESP re: financial data?
Is the organization externally accountable? 3rd party financial evaluation
Boards are accountable for legal and financial expectations of authorizer

Charter School Closure
Authorizers should control the message and the messenger:
What was expected of the school vs what was delivered
Issues that lead to closure:
        Safety
        Poor academic performance
        Quality of leadership
        Mismanagement
        Enrollment
        Financial stability- the most common cause of closure
Ensure that parents are informed of their options
Ensure that student records are secure and accessible for transfer
Does the contract provide for security and disposition of records if school closes?

Authorizer Accountability
Effective authorizer practices correlate with effective schools
What does State law say about the role and expectations of the authorizer?
Does State have a requirement to review the authorizer's performance?
Are there Authorizer performance expectations and measures?
How should authorizer decisions be examined and assessed? By whom?
Should school or student performance be a measure of authorizer performance?
One accountability measure is the implementation of school plans with fidelity.
Another is compliance with the charter school law.
Another asks if authorizer assesses contract accountability.
Ohio has 20 measures by which authorizers are evaluated
NACSA has standards for authorizers
Has the authorizer developed systems for continuous improvement?

Virtual Schools
Challenges for authorizers re: virtual schools
        High degree of student mobility
        Questions about truancy
        Accountability of ESP
        No link between authorizer and ESP
        Mismatch of law's expectation for physical charter schools vs virtual
        Greater emphasis on drop-outs and education recovery more likely
        ESPs have data but don't share it
        Selection of ESP does not necessarily involve a bid process
        ESPs don't necessarily use state tests?
        ESPs difficult to govern
        Teacher merit pay may be wild card.
        For profits have a different incentive
        What happens to student if he/she makes the wrong choice?
        Partnership of teacher and learning coach is a significant added variable
        Is it necessary to have a stay-at-home parent for K-5 + students?

Student to teacher ratios high
If open enrollment, may need 6-9 week trial period for students
May need pre-requisites for acceptance
Promise of virtual schools
Good option for self-directed students
Data can be easily captured and reviewed
Bullied students and others have safe environment

How can policy support the successful replication of good schools
Replication of schools should be a legislative interest
Grow number of schools slowly
Grow individual schools by adding grade levels per year
Have greater emphasis on student achievement
Support creative instructional models
Support collaboration among schools
Authorizer as facilitator and referee for above
Applicants need a local context to succeed
Growth works in concentric circles not so much by leapfrogging
Require specific provisions for renewal
Develop a list of best practices
Avoid policies that respond to squeaky wheel / assess larger implications
To what extent should policies be one size fits all or allow for flexibility
Ditto legislation
Work with State Reps re: school closure processes, so that closure not personal

Protecting Student Rights
Ensure that due process is always provided
Due process especially important re: suspension and expulsion
Only exception if student poses danger to people or property
School Policies must be in place from outset
Investigator should not be decider
Philosophy should be to keep kids in school
School officials must be knowledgeable of civil rights and due process responsibilities
Ditto authorizers
Authorizers might perform discipline audit if high disparity of suspensions/discipline of students with IEPs vs general students, significantly high or low rate of suspension, multiple parent complaints.